

Who to Trust

As fighter jets tear overhead and torrential rain blankets the region, we are ever more aware of the situation into which we go. Sitting just a few miles from the Syrian border, Antakya is our last stop before crossing into the unknown. It's our last chance for a proper meal and a real bed; our last chance to check our gear, and our last chance to turn back. Though neither of us intends to...

Jutting down into Syria this part of Turkey thrives off trade with its troublesome neighbour, and with a relatively porous border, we are told that Syrian spies are everywhere. This has made it hard for us, as we meet fixers, smugglers, and members of the FSA, whose families are all at risk should they be caught. It is hard to know who to trust, and what to believe, but we have worked slowly and safely and only with those who can be vouched for.

Thanks to the long and porous border however we will be able to cross, and at the moment we are evaluating the options. I can't name them here, but they involve crawling under the noses of Syrian and Turkish border guards; on horseback and belly, under barbed wire and over walls. Once inside we will be met by a network of activists and taken deeper in.

Unlike Libya, which was swamped with journalists, this conflict seems largely untouched. We expected a media frenzy but have found only a few other journalists, and by coincidence a number of them are friends.

There are a few reasons I would say press is thin on the ground – though ultimately it's because of the increased levels of danger. First of all there is no 'safe zone' (as there was in Benghazi), and no no-fly zone. The rebels are vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the army is not deserting at the same rate as they were in Libya, and the opposition is deeply fractured.

Assad's army is the most advanced in the region, after Saudi Arabia's, and they are rumoured to have an excellent air defence system, which makes foreign involvement, as in Libya, much harder. It therefore makes reporting this conflict, in effect from the side of the underdogs, far more risky.

Reports reaching us from inside the country suggest that the ceasefire is slipping away – but there's little surprise there. Gunships are rumoured to have strafed towns in Idlib province and the Shabiha death squads still roam the countryside. Shelling continues in Homs and demonstrations in Aleppo are being crushed.

It is very clear that this is the most complicated yet of the Arab spring conflicts, and a few main factors are at play. Iran is trying to increase its regional sphere of influence (successfully if you look at the Shia dominated Iraqi government) and losing an allied Syria would be a huge blow to this move. Iran also needs Syria to supply weapons to Hezbollah and will do what it takes to keep Assad in power.

Russia is also in a pivotal role and has a number of trade deals with Syria – weapons and oil. It also has its only naval base outside the ex-ussr here, and are very happy with the status quo – they may still be supplying arms. On the flip side however Russia has been on the wrong side of a few conflicts recently – Libya and Iraq, to name the most prominent ones, and in doing so have missed out on large post-conflict contracts. It is possible their stance will change if they see the tide turning against Assad. Their recent meeting with Syrian opposition groups in Moscow suggests they are willing to consider changing their stance.

America will do nothing till after the November elections, and while Saudi Arabia and Qatar are rumoured to be giving money and weapons nobody knows where it goes. Until these other states get involved Assad will have an easy task. What the consequences of openly defying UN observers are, is unclear, but while Russia is on the fence, there can be no security council resolution.

Meanwhile here in Antakya, we wait and watch, and our only danger is being pelted by street urchins.

We're staying in a wonderful guesthouse run by sister Barbara – babs as we know her. It's a very old house built around a beautiful courtyard set back from the warren of little streets that runs through the city. We have the place to ourselves, and it's a good place to pass the time as we wait and wait and wait, twiddling our thumbs till everything is in place and we can go in. We were supposed to go in today, but at the last minute this was been pushed back. It is hard to have prepared ourselves mentally for this only for it not to go ahead.

We now have another date some days away and in the meantime are off to visit the pop up hospitals and refugees.